

Elections over...long live elections!

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This June has proved to be rich in election campaigns. In Zaporizhya, on June 4, 2000, and in Mykolayiv and Vinnytsya on June 11, local residents elected their mayors. On June 25, a number of Ukrainian constituencies will vote for parliamentary candidates to fill in 10 vacated, due to different reasons, by MPs elected in 1998. In this context, the recent mayoral elections, particularly in Zaporizhya, where the by-elections will take place on June 25, can be viewed as a specific electoral prelude to the general election situation in this country.

The voting patterns of the recent mayoral elections give grounds for forecasts for the forthcoming by-elections which, according to the Presidential chief of staff Volodymyr Lytvyn, will determine the political process in the near future (Den, April 1, 2000). The election patterns will also characterize, among other things, the level of influence and the capacity of political parties to win elections. While it is obvious that the mayoral elections have their own specific features, the election techniques employed in the competition for mayoral seats have much in common with the major parliamentary campaign. Like in the local elections, the by-elections will be a tough competition of personalities, political forces and wallets backing individual candidates.

The recent mayoral elections in some of Ukraine's cities allow some conclusions that may be interesting in the context of the forthcoming by-elections. First and one of the most important conclusions is the remarkably low voter turnout. While partly voters' reluctance to turn up to polling stations may be explained by the summer vacation time and the fact that many of Ukrainians prefer to spend days off at their land plots growing the food they will consume in winter, another reason was the growing social apathy to elections of any sort and to the voting process, as ordinary voters see no results that would indicate their votes did make a difference. A high proportion of voters believes that election results are pre-determined.

In fact, Ukrainians have had to cast their votes rather often lately, in two rounds of the presidential elections in October-November 1999 and the April 16 referendum, called by President Kuchma following the people's initiative .

The fact that voters are tired with numerous elections can be well illustrated by turnout figures. On November 14, 1999, 1,056,664 of eligible voters of Zaporizhya took part in the presidential run-off, and the majority (49.69 percent) supported Communist leader Petro Symonenko. 1,056,852 (69.75 percent) eligible voters of Zaporizhya and the region took part in the April 16 referendum. However, only about 33 percent of voters came to the polling stations to elect their mayor on June 4, 2000. The figure allows to expect similarly low voter turnout at the forthcoming by-election in the Zaporizhya constituency. Therefore, virtually every vote cast for any of the fifteen registered candidates may prove to be the decisive one.

Another reason for low voter turnout for the recent mayoral elections may be the fact that the notorious administrative resource was not used in full, for there was no special need to use the non-traditional method of official influence under the circumstances. The percentage, scored by any of the candidates, was not as critical as it had been during the April referendum.

The general opinion is that during these elections voters supported, directly or indirectly, candidates that have something to do with the current authorities and that fit within those authorities' coordinate system ; being in the same coordinate system is the key criterion for success of a political force, argues Dr. Volodymyr Polokhalo, Editor-in-Chief of the Politychna Dumka journal (Den, June 14, 2000). This opinion has proved to be rather accurate at the final stage of elections in Vinnytsya and Mykolayiv, but the experience of Zaporizhya was quite different. Since voters of Zaporizhya will still have to elect their MP, we think it would be appropriate to take a closer look at the Zaporizhya local elections experience.

The mayoral seat in Zaporizhya had been initially claimed by 14 candidates, but two of them stepped down from the race. On June 4, 2000, voters of Zaporizhya elected police General Oleksandr Polyak as their mayor. He had been seeking that position since the previous mayoral elections. At that time his main rival was Oleksandr Holovko, who was finally elected for the position. However, Oleksandr Polyak and his team challenged the election outcome and finally succeeded in pressuring mayor Holovko into resignation. Within a few recent months, the mayoral duties had been performed by acting Mayor Stanislav Selin. He had been seen as a successor to Holovko and also took part in the recent elections. A peculiar detail about this candidate was the fact that he was supported by

Communists, but even in the traditionally reddish region of Zaporizhzhya it did not bring the desired result. The second best result was received by one of Gen. Poliak's main competitor, acting mayor Stanislav Selin who got 43,795 (21 percent of the votes). The third result belonged to deputy head of the acting mayor, Vyacheslav Mikhailutsa who received 19,128 or 9% of the votes in Zaporizhzhya. In fact, a substantial part of Mr. Poliak's victory can be attributed to local high-ranking officials who weakened each other during the race, reducing each other's chances to win, and actually freed the way for Poliak. The explicit support for representatives of the authorities who ran for the mayor's office did a bad service to the other strongest candidates. According to the Committee of Voters of Ukraine, speaking at a session of the regional council on April 28, 2000, then head of the Zaporizhzhya regional state administration, former First Vice Prime Minister Volodymyr Kuratchenko announced the following: the administration, its team, every, so to say, level of mechanisms that will be used, [...] we have chosen Mikhailutsa as our candidate, we will support his [race] for the position of the mayor of Zaporizhzhya, [...] we, from the administration, will support that candidate... (www.cvu.kiev.ua). In the context of the forthcoming by-election, it seems worth noting that Oleksandr Poliak's election campaign was supported by the Reforms and Order party. Currently the party also supports Oleksandr Sotnikov, who was number six candidate on the Reforms and Order party's election list for the 1998 parliamentary elections. Currently the former top manager of the AvtoZAZ-Daewoo JV Oleksandr Sotnikov is deputy head of the Zaporizhzhya regional state administration and the leader of the Reforms and Order regional party organization. His chances to be elected to the parliament are estimated at the most favorable. His main competitor now is Vyacheslav Zubov, chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Zaporizhzhya Ferroalloy Plant, a formally non-partisan candidate believed to be provided with financial and organizational support by the United Social Democratic Party of Ukraine (Ukraina I Svit Siohodni, June 17, 2000).

Hence, Zaporizhzhya can be viewed as a specific testing site for political and party races. It is also noteworthy that the normally active Communist Party of Ukraine did not nominate its own candidate to run for the Zaporizhzhya constituency seat. Instead, the Communists back Yaroslav Sukhyi, deputy director general for social security issues of the Motor-Sich Corporation.

However, in the constituency that strongly supported Communist leader Petro Symonenko a few months ago, chances of the candidate, backed by Communists, are now viewed as insignificant. This either means that Communists are losing influence in the region (for which, frankly speaking, there are no objective reasons), or that they are experiencing a strong shortage of bright personalities, or, which is the most likely, the Communist leadership is reluctant to compete with strong and powerful political competitors. All in all, eight Communist candidates will compete for the seats in the parliament on June 25, but it is still a question whether any of them can actually win.

The city of Mykolayiv has also presented an interesting voting pattern. On June 11, Volodymyr Chaika, head of the Mykolayiv branch of one of Ukraine's major banks, Ukreximbank, received the absolute majority of the votes (56.4 percent). The new mayor is fully integrated into the power coordinates system and the authorities' candidate. Prior to occupying his position as the top bank manager he changed a number of new nomenklatura jobs: he chaired the regional branch of the state-owned Pension Fund, led the regional council, and was deputy mayor of Mykolayiv. He was supported by almost all local branches of state agencies and institutions, and political parties. However, his absolute victory was slightly shaded by the very low voter turnout: only 23.5 percent of Mykolayiv voters came to polling stations on that day to elect their mayor. The figure represents a noteworthy contrast with the voter turnout at the April referendum, when the overwhelming majority (921,240) of eligible voters of the region participated. It is likely that low voter turnout will be characteristic of the forthcoming by-elections in one of Mykolayiv region constituencies on June 25.

The second best result at the recent mayoral elections in Mykolayiv (11.4 percent of the votes) was received by Victor Horbachov, MP, who nowadays combines activity of a member of the parliament with chairing the regional branch of the newly-established Working Ukraine party of one of Ukraine's strongest political-financial alliances of Victor Pinchuk, Igor Sharov and Andriy Derkach. Given the youth of the political formation, this result can be viewed as good, but it looks obviously insignificant in the context of the party's ambitions and potential. However, since no candidate of the Working Ukraine runs for the seat for the Mykolayiv constituency in the forthcoming by-election, it looks like the party does not consider the region to be a potential stronghold for boosting their political representation.

The general competition between political parties was well reflected by the recent contest of pretenders for the mayor's position in Vinnytsya. All in all, 39 candidates had been initially registered for the race, but only 24 of them arrived to the polling date. Again, the seat was won by a candidate whose integration in the power structures was the strongest. From the very start of the race for the mayoral seat the leader was deputy head of the regional state administration Volodymyr Vakhovsky. He was

supported by almost 33 percent of 30 percent of the eligible voters who came to the polling stations on that day. The Vinnytsya region is seen as one of the strongholds of the former party of power, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), that backed Vakhovsky's bid for the mayor's seat. On the other hand, a good result (13 percent) was received by a member of the Socialist party Ivan Bondarchuk, supported by Communists and the Sobor party, chaired by Anatoly Matvienko, MP, once the leader of the PDP and now one of the most vehement critics of the regime.

However, the Socialist could not become a strong competitor to the representative of the People's Democrats, backed by the remarkable administrative resource. Ukrainian Socialists claim that their candidate's failure was caused by the fact that the necessary result emerges when the votes are counted. Under ridiculous pretext, heads of local election commissions remove observers from [performing] control... (Tovarysh, No. 26, June 2000). Their victorious opponents announce that only one complaint was received by the territorial election commission (Ukraina I Svit Siohodni, June 17, 2000). Therefore, the claim that the Vinnytsya region has transformed into a reddish area of Ukraine is not actually accurate.

It is worth noting that in the first round of the recent presidential elections (October 30, 1999), the region's voters preferred the Socialist leader Oleksandr Moroz, and supported Petro Symonenko in the second round. Due to that the Vinnytsya region got a title of a red area. However, then the voters voted against, rather than for a candidate: many of them demonstrated their protest against the appointment of Dmytro Dvorkis, a rather controversial politician promoted by the United Social Democratic Party of Ukraine, to the position of head of the city state administration. On June 11 the United Social Democrats failed dramatically at the mayoral elections. Their candidate, Oleksiy Reva, received only 4.5 percent of the votes. However, the failure did not seem to disappoint the United Social Democrats' leadership. Commenting on the mayoral election results in Vinnytsya, the party chairman and First Vice Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament Victor Medvedchuk argued that No failure of the SDPU(o) representative in the Vinnytsya elections has occurred... Our party did not occupy an active position in those elections. We understand that a representative of the regional state administration had to win, and did won in Vinnytsya. That is why we did not interfere in the fight and took part in the race simply nominally (Den, June 14, 2000).

Hence, the recent mayoral results have demonstrated that low voter turnout become an important component of the election process. The successful candidates were those who managed to gain support of the authorities, who are integrated into the power system and who have relevant levers of influence to try and solve local constituency problems. An important component of the success was a certain set of local traditions of political preferences and support, like it occurred in Zaporizhya.

Yet, the most dramatic part of the current election season is to be seen on June 25, when the by-election outcome may cause substantial transformations in the Ukrainian parliament's political schemes.